

THE ORGANIST OF PONIKLA.

THE snow was dry, squeaking, and not over deep; but Klen had long legs, therefore he walked briskly over the road from Zagrabie to Ponikla. He went the more briskly because a good frost was coming, and he was dressed scantily in a short coat and a still shorter sheepskin overcoat above it, in black trousers and thin, patched boots. Besides, he had a hautboy in his hand; on his head a cap lined with the wind; in his stomach a couple of glasses of arrack; in his heart delight; and in his soul many causes for the delight.

That morning he had signed a contract with Canon Krayevski, as the future organist of Ponikla. Up to that time he had strolled about like any wretched gypsy, from inn to inn, from wedding to wedding, from fair to fair, from festival to festival, seeking profit with his hautboy, or on the organ, which he played better than any organist in that region. Now he was to settle down at last and have a fixed life beneath his own roof. A house, a garden, a hundred and fifty rubles a year, other earnings on occasions, a personal position, almost half spiritual, an occupation in the service of God, — who would not respect such a station?

Not long since any Matsek in Zagrabie, or Ponikla, if settled on a few morgs of land, looked on Pan Klen as a nobody; now people would take off their hats to him. An organist and, moreover, in such an immense parish

—that was not a bundle of straw! Klen had been sighing this long time for that position; but while old Melnitski lived, it was not to be thought of. The old man's fingers were stiff, and he played badly; but the canon would not send him away for anything, since he had been twenty years with him.

But when the "lysa" struck the old man so badly in the pit of the heart that in three days he died, Pan Klen did not hesitate to ask for the position, and the canon did not hesitate to give it, for a better organist could not be found in that region.

How such skill came to Pan Klen on the hautboy, the organ, and various other instruments which he understood, it was difficult to discover. He had not received the gift from his father, for his father, a man of Zagrabie, served during youth in the army, and did not work in his old age at music; he twisted hemp ropes, and played on no instrument beyond a tobacco-pipe, which was always between his mustaches.

From childhood Klen did nothing but listen wherever there was music. While a stripling, he went to "blow the bellows" for Melnitski at Ponikla. Afterward, when certain musicians came to Zagrabie, he ran away with them. He strolled about whole years with that company. God knows where he played, surely wherever it happened: at fairs, weddings, and in churches; only when the company broke up, or died, did he return to Zagrabie, as poor as a church mouse, haggard, and living like a bird on a branch. He continued to play, sometimes for the public, sometimes for the Lord God.

And, though people reproached him with want of stability, he became famous. They said of him in Zagrabie and in Ponikla, "Klen, just Klen. But when he begins to play it is no offence to the Lord, and it is a delight to

man!" Others said to him, "Fear God, Pan Klen, what devil is sitting within thee?"

And in real fact some sort of devil was sitting in that thin wretch with long legs. During the life of Melnitski, whenever he took the old organist's place on great holidays and festivals, he sometimes forgot himself thoroughly at the organ. This would happen, especially in the middle of mass, when people in the church were absorbed in prayer, when the censers had sent incense over the whole nave, and everything living was singing, when Klen had let himself out, and the service, with the ringing of great and little bells, with the odor of myrrh, amber, and fragrant plants, with the gleaming of lights and the glitter of the monstrance, had so elevated every soul that the whole church seemed flying off on wings to the sky. The canon, now raising, now lowering the monstrance, closed his eyes in ecstasy, and Pan Klen did the same in the choir; and it seemed to him that the organ itself was playing; that voices from the tin pipes rose like waves, flowed like rivers, rushed like torrents, gushed like fountains, poured like rain; that they were filling the whole church; that they were under the dome, and before the altar, in the rolls of incense, in the light of the sun, and in the souls of the people,—some awful and majestic like thunder, others like the singing of people, speaking in living words, still others sweet, fine, like falling beads, or the trilling of nightingales. And after mass, Pan Klen came down from the choir dazed, with eyes staring, as if after sleep; but as a simple man, he said, and thought, that he had tired himself out. The canon in the sacristy put some money in his hand, and some praise in his ear; then he went out among the people, who were thronged around the church; and there they raised their hats to him, though he

lived as a lodger in Zagrabie; and they admired him beyond measure.

But Pan Klen went in front of the church not to hear, "Hei! See! There goes Klen!" But he went to see that which was dearest to him in Zagrabie, in Ponikla, and in the whole world, Panna Olka, the daughter of the tile-maker of Zagrabie. She fastened into his heart like a wood-tick, with her eyes, which were like star-thistles, with her bright face, and her lips red as cherries.

Pan Klen himself, during the rare moments in which he looked on this world with sound judgment, and in which seeing that the tile-maker would not give him his daughter, thought that it would be better to let her go; but he felt, with terror, that he could not let her go; and with great alarm he repeated to himself, "Hei! she has got in! Thou wilt not pull her out with pincers!"

For her it was surely that he stopped wandering about, for her he lived; and when he played on the organ he thought that she was listening, and therefore he played better.

And she loving, to begin with, his "talent" for music, loved him afterward for himself; and that Pan Klen was for her the dearest of all, though he had a strange, dark face, eyes that were looking somewhere else, a scant coat, a still scanter overcoat, and legs as long and as slim as the legs of a stork.

But "the father," the tile-maker, though he, too, carried air in his pockets for the most part, was unwilling to give Olka to Klen. "Any one will look at the girl," said he; "why should such a fellow as Klen fix her fate?" and he hardly let the man into the house, and sometimes he would not let him in.

But when old Melnitski died, everything changed right away.

Klen, after signing the contract, went with all speed to the tile-maker's.

"I do not say," said the tile-maker to him, "that something must surely happen right away; but an organist is not a tramp." And, inviting him into the house, he treated him to arrack, and feasted him as a guest. And when Olka came in, the father rejoiced with the young people because Klen had become a man; he would have his house, garden, and, next to the canon, would be the great person in Ponikla.

So Klen had sat with them from midday till evening, to his own great delight and to Olka's; and now he was returning by the road to Ponikla, on squeaking snow and in twilight.

It was preparing for frost; but what cared Pan Klen? He merely went faster and faster; and, while going, he thought of that day, thought of Olka, and he was warm. A happier day in his life there had never been.

After an empty, treeless road, through frozen meadows covered with snow, now red and now blue beneath the sky, he carried his gladness like a lantern which he had to light him in the dark. He remembered again and again all that had happened: his conversation with the canon; the signing of the contract; every word with the tile-maker and Panna Olka. When they were alone for a while she said to him, "It was all one to me! I would have gone with you, Anton, without that, even beyond the sea; but for father it is better in this way!" He kissed her on the elbow with great gratitude, saying, "God reward thee, Olka, for the ages of ages, amen!" And now, when he recalled it, he was a little ashamed of himself, for having kissed her on the elbow, and for having said too little to her; for he felt that if the tile-maker would have permitted, she would have

gone with him to the edge of the world. Such an honest girl! And then she would have gone with him if necessary along that empty road in the snow. "Oh, thou, my pure gold!" thought Pan Klen, "since it is so, thou wilt be a lady." Then he went still more swiftly, and the snow squeaked more loudly.

Soon he began to think, "Such a woman will not deceive a man." Then great gratitude mastered him. And indeed if Olka had been there with him, he would not have held out; he would have thrown his hautboy on the ground, and pressed her to his bosom with all the strength in his bones. He ought not to have acted differently an hour earlier; but it is always so: wherever a man has to do anything or say anything from the heart, he "becomes a fool, and has a wooden tongue." It is easier to play on the organ.

Meanwhile, the golden and red stripes which were shining on the western sky changed gradually into golden ribbons and golden knots, and finally they vanished. Darkness came; and the stars twinkled in the heavens, looking sharply and dryly on the earth, as is usual in winter. The frost grew severe, and began to bite the ears of the future organist of Ponikla; so, knowing the road perfectly, Pan Klen decided to cut across the field, and reach his own house the more quickly.

After a while he seemed black on the level, snowy expanse,—tall, sticking up ridiculously. It occurred to him that to kill time he might play a little before his fingers got stiff; and as he thought so he did. His voice sounded strangely in the night and on that waste, as if he were frightened a little by that white, melancholy plain; and it sounded all the more strangely that Klen played the most joyous things. He recollected that he had begun to play and sing, after one and another glass at the tile-

maker's, that Olka accompanied him gladly with her thin little voice. He wished now to play those same songs, so he began with that with which she had begun:

“Level, O God, the mountains with the valleys,
Let them be very level!
Bring, O God, my love,
Bring him early!”

But the song did not please the tile-maker, for it seemed to him a “peasant song,” and he commanded Klen to sing a “noble song.” Then they took up another, which Olka had learned in Zagrabie:—

“Pan Ludwig went a hunting,
He left Helunia like a picture.
Pan Ludwig came home, the music was playing.
The trumpeters trumpeting, Helunia was sleeping.”

This was more to the taste of the tile-maker. But when pleasure seized them they laughed most at the “Green Pitcher.” The lady in that song, before she laughed at the end, cried and sang piteously for her broken pitcher:

“My green pitcher,
Oh, the Pan broke it!”

But the Pan falls to consoling her:—

“Quiet, Panna, weep not,
I will pay thee for thy pitcher!”

Olka prolonged as much as possible, “My gre-e-e-en pitcher,” and then laughed. Klen took his lips from the hautboy, and answered her as the Pan, with a great flourish:—

“Quiet, Panna, weep not —”

And now, remembering in the night that gladness of the daytime, he played to himself “My Green Pitcher,” and smiled in addition, as much as his lips would allow,

employed as they were in blowing the hautboy. But as the frost was violent, and his lip were freezing to the mouthpiece of the instrument, and his fingers were stiff going over the keys, he ceased to play and went on, somewhat panting, and with his face in a mist which rose from his breath.

After a time he got tired, for he had not counted on this, that in fields snow lies more deeply than on a beaten road, and that it is not easy to draw one's legs out of it. Besides, in meadows in some places there are hollows, made even by drifts through which one must wade to the knee. Klen began to regret then that he had left the road, for some wagon might have come along on the way to Ponikla.

The stars twinkled more and more sharply; the frost became more severe, but Pan Klen even sweated; still, when the wind rose at moments, and blew toward the river, he became very cold. He tried to play again, but as he had to keep his mouth closed he tortured himself all the more.

At last a feeling of loneliness seized him. Round about it was so empty, silent, and remote that he was wonder-stricken. In Ponikla a warm house was waiting for him; but he preferred to think of Zagrabie, and said to himself, "Olka is going to sleep; but there, praise be to God, it is warm in the house." And at the thought that it was warm and bright there for Olka, Pan Klen's honest heart rejoiced all the more, the colder and darker the way was for him.

The meadows ended at last, and then began pastures grown over here and there with juniper. Pan Klen was so tired now that a great desire seized him to sit down, with his hautboy, under the first sheltered bush, and rest. "But I shall freeze if I do so," thought he, and went on.

Unfortunately, among junipers, as along fences, snow-drifts form sometimes. Klen passed through a number of these, and became so exhausted that finally he said to himself, —

“I will sit down. Unless I fall asleep I shall not freeze; and to keep from sleeping, I will play again, ‘My Green Pitcher.’”

He sat down, played again, again the vanishing voice of the hautboy was heard in the silence of night, and over the snow. But Klen’s eyelids stuck together more and more, and the notes of the “Green Pitcher,” growing weaker, and gradually growing silent, were silent altogether at last. Still he struggled against sleep; he was conscious yet; he was thinking still of Olka; but at the same time he felt himself in a greater desert, more and more alone, as if forgotten; and wonderment seized him that she was not there with him in that loneliness and that night.

He murmured, “Olka! where art thou?”

And once more he spoke as if calling her, —

“Olka!”

The hautboy dropped from his stiffened hands.

Next morning the dawn shone on his sitting figure, with the hautboy near his long legs, and his face was blue, astonished as it were, and at the same time fixed in listening to the last note of the song, “My Green Pitcher.”